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ABSTRACT

This document summarizes the first wave of data collection and findings for the elementary, middle, and senior high schools participating as pilot sites for the Positive Attitudes in Tennessee Schools (PATS) Project. Following an overview of the goals of the project, the school improvement change model used by the project, and the research and evaluation components of the project, the method and procedures for data collection and analysis of data are described. A summary of school climate data gathered from 1,444 staff members at 37 school pilot sites includes information on order, administrative leadership, school facilities and environment, school community environment, instructional programs, student expectations, and collaborative problem solving. School climate dimensions are next discussed in terms of selected variables such as school level, school-community type, and age groups. Using 1989 data obtained from over 8,000 students, the document discusses 11 aspects of classroom climate and 4 dimensions of the student's self-concept as a learner. Both topics are reviewed in light of variables such as school community type and students' academic performance, extracurricular participation, educational plans, tendency to drop out, and at-risk status. Last, conclusions regarding school learning environments and learner perceptions are offered. (8 references) (CLA)

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# Executive Summary: Fall 1989 Learning Environments in Tennessee Schools

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College of Education
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## INTRODUCTION

State-level leadership in Tennessee is committed to the notion that effective educational reform depends on leadership within the schools rather than on prescriptions of governing boards and agencies. The report, *21st century challenge: Statewide goals and objectives for educational excellence* (Smith, 1990), details issues to be addressed in the coming decade, and the state's role in current school reform is specifically focused on improving work conditions in the schools, encouraging local planned change initiatives, and identifying critical issues not addressed in past reform efforts.

In 1989, responding to expressed needs of local education agencies and following the leadership and commitments of the Governor and the Commissioner of Education, the Department of Professional Development initiated the Positive Attitudes in Tennessee Schools (PATS) Project. Careful to implement programs that would respond to the initiatives of the 21st Century Challenge, professional development personnel established seven criteria for PATS. They determined that it must: (1) be grounded on research; (2) be made available to all school professional and classified personnel; (3) utilize training modules developed for use and implementation over an extended time period; (4) be implemented at the local school levels by leadership teams; (5) be designed to address state-wide concerns such as students at risk of failure or dropping out of school, teacher enhancement, and parental/community involvement; (6) have state wide management and technical assistance provided by state department personnel; and (7) possess a research and evaluation component to be initiated in concert with implementation of the program.

The Center for Research in Educational Policy has responsibility for the research and evaluation component of the PATS Project. This report summarizes the first wave of data collection and findings for the schools participating as pilot sites during the first semester of implementation. Findings here are derived from

two reports which present results of learning environment data obtained through the fall 1989 audits. One document, *Final report: PATS Project learning environment audits, Fall 1989* (Butler, Alberg, McNelis, 1990) contains numerous data summaries in graphic and tabular formats. A second report, *The PATS Project: A State of Tennessee school reform initiative* (Butler, Alberg, McNelis, Pike, & Chandler, 1990), presents a comprehensive overview of the project during the 1989-90 year with findings derived from various statistical analyses. Both of these reports are available for distribution upon request.

## THE PATS PROJECT

### Goals

The PATS Project was designed to achieve several goals over a five year period through data-based decision making by school leadership teams with state-level coordination and support. These goals are: to improve the quality of school climate for teachers, staff and administrators; to improve the quality of school climate for students; to provide renewal activities for teachers through positive professional development activities; to motivate students to stay in school; to increase the performance level of students, particularly those "at risk"; to enable students to make rational life decisions, based on high self esteem and positive attitudes; to promote a cooperative relationship among all concerned constituents of the educational community; and to celebrate outstanding PATS programs in Tennessee (*Positive Attitudes in Tennessee: Program description*, 1989).

### School Improvement Change Model

Dissemination is the change model utilized in the PATS Project to guide planning and implementation focusing on school improvement. As a policy tool, the dissemination model relies heavily on the use of knowledge-based products by

external agents in stimulating and supporting planned change at the local level (Firestone & Corbett, 1988).

Specific school improvement activities of the PATS Project are based upon several key considerations:

1. Program products are to be non-threatening.
2. Leadership teams are trained to introduce the materials and activities and coordinate implementation at each participating site.
3. Consistent program focus is maintained in all sites through the provision of technical assistance and state-wide communication.
4. Complexities of change in association with site factors are acknowledged and utilized.
5. Practicality of program implementation is linked to local organizational procedures and guidelines.
6. Innovative practices are expected as outcomes of the implementation process.
7. New information generated in the sites and successful change processes realized are disseminated to other sites.

The model incorporates the recognition that organizational and environmental changes sought may depend upon modifications of the normative structures of schools that support or inhibit change and improvement. Thus research and evaluation activities were designed to describe the normative structures of the participating schools at selected points in time and explain changes that resulted from the improvement plans implemented.

## The Research and Evaluation Components

The research and evaluation components of the PATS Project were developed as a result of planning by the research team and state department representatives during the spring and summer of 1989. Personnel of the College of

Education, Memphis State University, assumed responsibility for developing this plan under the sponsorship of the Center for Research in Educational Policy, formerly the Center of Excellence in Education, a research unit of the College funded by the State Board of Regents and the Tennessee General Assembly.

The research and evaluation components of the PATS Project were based on two complimentary models. One model, known as a "policy research and evaluation model" (Nisbet, 1988), utilizes issues of current concern as priority topics for systematic inquiry to provide an information base for informed decision making by practitioners. A Learning Environment Assessment System (LEAS) , grounded on the policy research and evaluation model, was created to facilitate data-based decision making regarding school improvement initiatives planned by the leadership teams in the schools participating in the PATS Project. The LEAS is grounded on the belief that data generated in the school sites can be used effectively in directing planning of learning environment improvements. The three major components of LEAS are data audits and reporting procedures relating to school climate, classroom climate, and student conceptions of themselves as learners. Data yielded by LEAS are used by school leadership teams to develop school improvement action plans through use of a scheme developed by P. C. Duttweiler.

The second model utilized is "fundamental research", where the purpose is to contribute to knowledge, understanding, and the improvement of theory. Data obtained in the project are analyzed and reported within these two broad conceptualizations. Through use of the policy research model, the data assist in establishing the "facts", thereby informing judgments regarding individual school learning environment needs, problems, and strengths. Framed within the fundamental research model, the same data are used in answering questions which hold promise for contributing to the knowledge base about school climates and learning environments.

## METHOD AND PROCEDURES

Findings in this report are based on fall 1989 data obtained in 37 schools participating as pilot sites during the 1989-90 school year. Data obtained from four state operated schools serving special student populations are reported in *Appendix A* (Butler, 1990, June). The 37 schools reflect various elementary (n=20), middle/junior high (n=6), and senior high school (n=11) organizational structures and are located in a variety of communities (e.g., rural, small town, suburban, and urban). Spread throughout the three regions of the state (east, middle, and west) they vary considerably in size of professional/support staff and student populations.

### Instruments

Three instruments were used to generate quantitative measures of school and classroom climates and perceptions students maintained about themselves as learners. *The Tennessee School Climate Inventory* (TSCI), administered to all school personnel participating in 1989 fall PATS Project in-service training, generated measures of overall school climate. Student data were obtained through use of the *Tennessee Classroom Climate Inventory* (TCCI) and the *Self Concept as a Learner-Revised* (SCALR). TCCI solicits student perceptions of 11 dimensions of classroom climate. SCALR yields four measures of student perceptions of their engagement with schools and learning (motivation, task orientation, problem solving, and class membership). Respondents also reported personal and demographic information used as independent variables in the analyses conducted. Teacher-reported student data relative to at-risk factors, participation in free or reduced lunch programs, grade or subject repetition, and participation in pull-out programs were requested and received from most sites.

## Data Analyses

Through an analysis of the percent of respondents agreeing with the inventory items, conclusions were drawn regarding learning environment dimensions in the schools. An overall positive perception was judged to be present when at least half of the respondents agreed with an item. More positive perceptions are assumed to exist when 60% or more of the respondents report agreement. The percentages are reported in tabular format in PATS Project technical reports and appear in parentheses where appropriate in the following discussion of findings.

In order to explore factors associated with differences in perceptions, scale means were analyzed by significance tests (ANOVAs or t-tests). Analyses were conducted using scale means as dependent variables and selected demographic information as independent variables. Independent variables used in analyzing the faculty and staff data included school level, school-community type, and age groups. Independent variables used to analyze the student data were the same for both sets of dependent measures and include sex, race, school-community type, academic performance group, participation in extra-curricular activities, college plans, drop out intentions, and being identified as at risk.

# FINDINGS

## School Climate Profiles

Fall 1989 school climate data summarized here were obtained from 1444 individuals holding faculty, administrator, or support staff positions in 37 schools: 20 elementary schools (N=686), 6 junior high or middle schools (N=200), and 11 high schools (N=558). Data reported by personnel employed in four state operated schools serving special student populations are reported in *Appendix A*.

School Climate Dimensions

Order. The schools are viewed as safe and secure places to work (73%) with problems of order associated with student conduct in the schools. While a majority held generally positive views toward student behavior and the enforcement of rules for student conduct, student misbehavior is perceived to exist at all levels. Student conduct seems to be more of a problem at the junior high level with school absence and tardiness more serious in senior high schools. Joint responsibilities for student discipline existing between schools and homes are reported by approximately a third of the respondents.

Administrative Leadership. Positive perceptions of administrative leadership in the schools is evident at all levels. Administrators are reported as being visible in the schools (66%), providing strong instructional leadership (55%), communicating that students can learn (66%), encouraging teachers to be creative (61%), and providing evaluative feedback on staff performance (57%). Administrators are also viewed as protecting instructional time in the schools and providing leadership in reviewing and updating schools goals, though less so at the junior high level.

School Facilities and Environments. Generally positive perceptions of school facilities exist for elementary and junior high schools, with senior high buildings viewed less positively. Pride in the schools and students is reflected (61%) with faculty/staff reporting that they feel important (64%). Less positive perceptions exist for the presence of varied learning environments, an atmosphere of trust, and respect existing between students and school employees.

School/Community Involvement. Parents are reported to be treated courteously (75%) and as serving on advisory committees, primarily at the elementary level. Less than a fourth of the respondents agree that parents are involved in home-school support networks (21%). Parent volunteers are more active in the elementary schools and parents are encouraged to visit elementary

classrooms more than junior and senior high classes. Elementary schools make more use of newsletters and bulletins for communication with parents and report more involvement with community businesses.

Instructional Programs. A variety of teaching strategies (70%) and materials (66%) are reported being used along with appropriate evaluation methods (69%). Curriculum guides direct coverage of subject content (62%), learning is sequenced to insure student success (51%), and students are perceived as having opportunities to develop higher-order skills (58%). Pull-out programs in the schools are not seen as interfering with basic instruction. Overall, instructional programs are viewed positively at all grade levels.

Student Expectations. School rules and expectations for students are reported as being defined and communicated (66%) with students held responsible for their actions (62%). Low achievers are also seen as having opportunities to succeed (58%). However, less than half of the junior and senior high teachers agree that high expectations are held for all students. Most students are viewed as participating in school activities though they do not share responsibility for school environments, especially at the junior and senior high levels.

Collaborative Problem Solving. School faculties are viewed as being committed to the goals of the schools (64%) and believe that problems can be solved without outside help (64%). Communications (55%) and cooperation (54%) existing among the faculties and staff personnel are viewed positively, though more participation by teachers in decision making is desired (51%). Students are generally not encouraged to help others with problems (36%) or participate in solving problems in the schools (24%).

School Climate Dimensions by Selected Variables

School Level. Elementary school climates are viewed more positively than

those existing in junior or senior high schools. While no significant variations exist between junior and senior high climate dimensions, more positive perceptions are associated with senior high schools for all dimensions except Environment and Student Expectations.

School-Community Type. Rural and urban school climates were not found to differ except on School and Community Involvement. Urban schools were viewed more positively on this dimension.

Age Groups. Generally, teachers 50 and over hold more positive perceptions of school climate dimensions, followed by teachers between the ages of 30 and 39. Older teachers view school climates more positively than younger teachers, especially Environment, School and Community Involvement, and Instructional Programs.

## Classroom Climate and Self Concept as Learner Audits

Fall 1989 student data profiles were constructed from data obtained from more than 8000 students: 1375 fourth grade students and 1359 fifth grade students; 1236 seventh grade students and 1159 eighth grade students; and 1484 tenth grade students and 1501 eleventh grade students. Student data were not provided by three elementary schools. In one school, student data collection was inappropriate since only primary level children are enrolled. Results based on student data obtained in four state operated schools serving special populations are reported in *Appendix A*.

### Classroom Climate Dimensions

Class Cohesiveness. Students at all grade levels report that they get to know each other in their classes and that student cooperation is present, though less so in the 7th grade. Students who can not get along cause problems in classes at all three

levels. Moreover, students report they tend to engage in classwork with close friends.

Equity in the Classrooms. Positive student perceptions exist relative to equity in the classroom at all grade levels: everyone has a chance to do well and students are not treated differently because of their race, sex, families or friends. Class favorites, however, are reported at all levels and some students are perceived as feeling left out or ignored in the classes, especially at the lower grade levels.

Curriculum. Students hold positive views of course objectives and those in the lower grades see their learning as more useful that students in the 10th grade. Student opinions are not reported as being used at any grade level in deciding what will be studied.

Class Difficulty. Student perceptions of class difficulty are generally positive though some students are seen as not having to work very hard. Fourth grade students report classes as more challenging than do students in the upper grades. All students report that adequate time is taken to explain the material.

Class Communications. Elementary and junior high students report that students are criticized in front of others and students at all levels perceive contact with parents to be primarily about problems. Fourth graders report that helpful comments are being made about class work. Student class discussions are not viewed positively at any level though more exist at the 10th grade level.

Student Evaluation. While students report they may not know how they are doing until the end of the grading period, students at all three grade levels are positive in their perceptions of evaluations used in classes. This includes the use of different kinds of assignments and tests, fairness in grading classwork, and the use of tests based on materials discussed.

Physical Environment. Classroom space as well as books and materials needed are viewed positively at all levels. Fourth graders reported more positive perceptions regarding classrooms being bright and comfortable. Classwork is generally not displayed for others to see.

Order. While classes at all three grade levels are associated with positive perceptions regarding organization and rules being the same for all students, confusion is reported for all grades. Junior high/middle school students report a higher level of student misconduct interfering with learning.

Instruction. Classes at all levels are associated with positive perceptions of learning with classes at the lower levels reflecting more student involvement. Fourth grade students hold more positive views of homework and rate higher interesting presentations of subject matter in their classes.

Class Cultures. Students at all levels report they are expected to respect the rights and feelings of others in their classes with students in the fourth grade reporting more trust being present. Elementary students report more positive perceptions of students and teachers being proud of classwork. Class boredom is more apparent in responses of junior and senior high students.

Student Satisfaction. Students at all levels like to have class visitors with fourth graders reporting more enjoyment of their classes and looking forward to going to class. Respondents in all grade levels report students often being discouraged.

Classroom Climate Dimensions by Selected Variables

Sex. On eight of the class climate dimensions female students at all three

grade levels reported more positive perceptions than did male students.

Race. Variations of class climate by race were found at all levels, with more differences existing at the elementary and junior high school levels. At the elementary level, black students were more positive than whites on the Communications, Environment, Order, and Culture dimensions. White students were more positive on the Equity dimension. At the junior high school level, black students hold more positive views of Equality, Curriculum, Communication, Instruction, Culture, and Satisfaction. In senior high schools white students view more positively Evaluation, Order, and Culture.

School-Community Type. Classroom climate factors were found to differ for urban and rural schools at all grade levels with the most pronounced differences at the senior high level favoring rural schools. At the elementary level, rural students viewed their classes more positively on Cohesiveness, Equality, Curriculum, Environment, and Order. At the junior high level, urban students viewed more favorably the dimensions of Equality, Curriculum, Communications, Order, Instruction, Culture, and Satisfaction.

Academic Performance. Differences at all three grade levels were found for eight classroom climate dimensions when the data were analyzed by student academic performance group. Students in higher performance groups consistently report more positive perceptions of class climates. However, academic performance group was not found to be a factor associated with Communications or Physical Environment.

Participation in Extra-Curricular Activities. Students view their classes more positively if they are also participants in school extra-curricular activities. Only on one dimension, that of Environment, were perceptions not found to differ due to involvement in extra-curricular activities.

Educational Plans. Perceptions of nine classroom climate dimensions were found to differ between students who intend to go to college and those who do not. In all cases, college-bound students hold more positive perceptions.

Drop-Out. Students who have not considered dropping out of school consistently report more positive perceptions of class climates. This generalization holds true for 7th and 10th grade students for all dimensions except Communications.

At Risk. Students identified as at risk reflect less positive perceptions on eight of the dimensions measured. Differences existing are most obvious at the junior and senior high levels. Being at risk was not associated with differences for Instruction, Environment, or Communications at any level.

Self Concept as Learner Dimensions

Motivation. Students at all three levels report positive perceptions of themselves as learners on wanting to do well in school, beginning work on new activities, and willingness to change when they are doing something wrong. Fifth graders state they feel good about school work and, along with 8th grade students, like jobs that give them responsibility. Eleventh graders report they do things without being told several times. Less positive aspects of motivation were associated with eleventh grade students giving up easily and students in all three grade levels reporting they do not do extra work, only what they are told to do. Students at all levels report being hesitant to ask teachers to explain something again.

Task Orientation. For academic task orientations, the most positive perceptions were getting work done on time and doing their share of group work.

Fifth and eighth graders were more positive than eleventh graders regarding doing well when working alone and trying to be careful with their work. Students at all levels report having difficulty remembering directions, deciding what they need to study, making mistakes because they do not listen, and doing things without thinking. Eleventh grade students report they may copy work from their friends and give up if they do not understand something.

Problem Solving. Students in all three grades believe they can tell the difference between important and unimportant things in a lesson and feel good about what they are learning. Eleventh graders show more confidence in being able to figure things out for themselves. The less positive dimensions of problem solving consistently reported at all grade levels included difficulty in remembering, not understanding what is going on in class, doing poorly on tests, and changing their minds a lot.

Class Membership. Students at all levels report positive views regarding class membership including getting along with teachers, having lots of friends, ease in getting along and being fair with classmates, as well as seeking to understand others. Fifth graders, more than the others, report that they like to become active in class projects and activities. All levels report disinterest in what others do in class with eleventh grade students having difficulty in talking with others and, along with 5th graders, feeling left out of class activities.

Self Concept as Learner Dimensions by Selected Variables

Sex. For three of the constructs measured, female students at all grade levels hold more positive views of themselves as learners than males. No differences existed at any grade level for Problem Solving.

Race. Differences in academic self concept between white and black students

were found only at the junior and senior high school levels. At the junior high level black students hold more positive views than whites on Motivation, Task Orientation, and Problem solving. White senior high students view themselves more favorably on the Class Membership dimension.

Community Type. While few differences between rural and urban students were observed for the academic self concept measures, differences found favored urban school students.

Academic Performance. Consistent differences at the three grade levels were found for the four factors of self concept when the data were analyzed by academic performance group. Higher performance group students consistently view themselves more positively.

Extra-Curricular Activities. Academic self perceptions were found to differ for those who do and do not participate in school extra-curricular activities. At both the junior and senior high school levels, students involved in extra-curricular activities report more positive perceptions of themselves as students.

Educational Plans. Students who plan to go to college view themselves more positively than students who do not plan to go to college. Differences were found for all four constructs at both grade levels.

Drop-Out. When self concept factors were analyzed by school-drop out plans, those who have never considered dropping out consistently report more positive views of themselves as learners.

At Risk. Students identified as at risk at all three grade levels viewed themselves less positively as learners. Differences observed were consistent across the three student samples.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although the goals of the fall 1989 audits were to provide baseline information about school learning environments, to support data-based decision making relative to school improvements in the school sites, and to assist state-level program evaluation, several observations can be made from the analyses. These observations are framed conceptually within the three constructs of school climate, classroom climate, and academic self concept, which are viewed as organizational realities creating the learning environments in the schools. Various empirical indicators of the normative structures which directed teaching and learning in the schools during the fall semester of 1989 are identified. Generalizations reported are based on aggregate data treating elementary, junior high/middle schools, and senior highs schools as units for analysis. No claims can be made for the normative structures existing within individual school contexts during the fall of 1989, though school faculties and administrators were provided data by which normative comparisons could be made.

As learning environments, it is apparent that professional and support personnel in the schools feel confident about instructional programs and administrative leadership, with more positive perceptions of school environments existing at the elementary and senior high levels and maintained by older members of the faculty and staff. Classroom context data generated by students provide additional confirmation of the perceived strengths of the instructional programs in the schools. Students rated high curriculum and instruction within their classes and evaluations used to assess learning outcomes. School facilities are also viewed positively by all. Beliefs and procedures associated with principles of equity and equal opportunity in both school and classroom contexts are indicated by the data reported. Moreover, racial minorities maintain positive views of equity functioning with school contexts. Female students consistently maintain more positive academic self images that males at all levels.

As ordered school environments, mixed perceptions are reported. While school personnel report positive views toward student conduct and the enforcement of school rules, student behavior appears to be a problem. Student data confirm the presence of misbehavior interfering with classroom instruction. While expectations regarding student behavior are recognized and reported by both faculty and students, full participation by students in the total life of the schools is not evident. For example, students do not report sharing responsibilities for school environments, participating actively in solving school problems, or contributing to decisions about what will be studied. High faculty expectations regarding achievement for all students are not evident though faculty believe that low achievers are provided opportunities to achieve.

As social contexts possessing nurturing environments for supporting and esteeming both faculty and students, the schools appear to have normative structures which give priority to the well being of teachers, support personnel, and administrators, but not students. Adults in the school report that they feel important, with communications and cooperation existing. Though teachers desire more participation in decision making, they seem to be committed to the goals of the school, and feel confident that they can solve school problems without outside help. High trust existing between students and school employees, however, was not reported. Older students, especially, did not maintain strong views relating to their being trusted. Students at all levels indicate that they do what they are told to do and may give up easily. Students report that they interact primarily with close friends and may feel left out or ignored in class, and that their participation in class discussions is not valued, especially at the lower grade levels. Students report that they do have opportunity to know each other in class and that they cooperate with each other. Overall, student satisfaction with classes during the fall semester was not high, especially at the upper grade levels, and older students did not report strong feelings relative to looking forward to classes.

While the schools tend to be remarkably similar in many features, variations were found between schools and their communities. Elementary schools report

more parent and business involvement and appear more ready for parents to visit classrooms. Strong school-home support networks do not exist at any level though elementary schools make more use of printed communications with parents. Students see school and home communications as primarily dealing with classroom problems. Based upon staff data, schools serving urban and rural communities were not found to reflect variations other than on the school-community involvement aspects with schools in urban settings viewed more positively.

Norms associated with student academic self concepts include learners wanting to do well in school, liking new classroom activities, being willing to change when they are doing something wrong, and generally feeling good about what they do in class. Students indicate they have difficulties remembering directions, making mistakes because they do not listen, and doing things without thinking. Younger students, especially, say they like classroom tasks which give them responsibility, do well working alone, prefer being active in class, and try to be careful with their work. Older students report more confidence as learners, and will do things without having to be told several times though they may give up easily. Students in the senior high school report difficulty talking with others, feeling left out of class activities, and being more inclined to copy work from friends. Self perceptions associated with developmental patterns of learners at different grade levels are, to some extent, reflected in the data.

Student perceptions of their classroom climates during the fall of 1989 were found to differ due to several factors. Female students at all levels rate their classroom environments higher than male students and racial group membership was also found to be a factor contributing to differing perceptions of classroom climates. Black students in the junior high/middle schools were consistently more positive than white students, while white senior high students held more positive views of class cultures, order, and evaluation. Classrooms in rural school settings are clearly viewed more positively at the high school level than are those in urban schools. Rural junior high/middle school classrooms, however, are viewed less positively than urban ones.

Students who appear to identify with the processes and structures of schools and classroom were found to consistently report more positive perceptions. Students with academic orientations consistently view their classes more favorably. Classrooms at all levels appear to function as social systems primarily focusing on goals, processes, and interactions congruent with aspirations and needs which can be labeled as academic. Moreover, student self concepts as learners are obviously reinforced within classroom contexts at all levels. The model of classrooms conveyed in these data reflect normative structures existing at all levels which nurture and support those dimensions of self generally thought to be congruent with school success.

Whether the realities of school learning environments, and learner perceptions, measured during the fall of 1989 will be similar at later points in time is unknown. Data generated in the Spring of 1990, and in subsequent years, will be utilized in answering questions relative to changes and stability in patterns over time. School improvement plans being developed and implemented to produce changes in learning environments, as well as enhance the self concepts of all learners, may indeed yield outcomes which differ from those observed in the baseline data. The organizational and behavioral patterns reflected in these data, however, may have consistency and stability difficult to modify.

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